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AUTHOR Caldwell, David
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ABSTRACT

In addition to using films in the German classroom to introduce students to German culture and history, it is important to show and study the film as film. This procedure emphasizes the importance of the film as a part of creative arts in Germany and demands student participation in observation and discussion. Many German silent films are accessible and reasonably priced, and they can be shown in one or two class periods. Silent films are appropriate to any language level, with discussion limited only by the students' abilities to express themselves and, to some extent, by the film's visual style. Noteworthy film techniques can be examined, including camera angle and movement, techniques for expressing meaning without sound, special effects, and movement within the film. Cultural and socioeconomic elements can be assessed, including the influence of artistic trends and attitudes toward the United States. (MSE)

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David Caldwell
University of Northern Colorado

Silent Film in the German Classroom

Film has been used by German teachers for some time now in the service of various pedagogical goals: expansion of vocabulary, introduction to linguistic structure, polishing of pronunciation, as, for example, with the Guten Tag films; exposure to German culture, as with the Deutschlandspiegel films; and perhaps more than we like to admit, as a means of taking up 15 or more minutes of classtime and providing both students and teacher with a respite from the routine. Whatever the goals, though, we show films in part because we are reasonably sure that that flickering rectangle of light at the front of the room will, at least for a while, capture the attention of the students, and that the film stands a good chance of imparting something memorable to the student's mind, be it a visual or audio impression, or something less readily designated: a feel, perhaps, for the native culture.

In order to introduce our students to German culture, we show them films about German history, German government and economics, as well as about the arts in Germany. Often overlooked, however, is the possibility for showing film as film. In our endeavor to instill in students an appreciation of German culture, often while also teaching them German grammar, we neglect to mention that film itself is a part of the creative arts in Germany, a cultural facet

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that also reflects advances in technologies we now take for granted when we flip on the television or visit the local cinema. At the the same time we have the additional benefit of the end product of this new technology: a vivid record of German societal trends and concerns at various points in post World War I history.

I wish to make a case for using German silent film as a part of instruction in German language and culture and then provide an example from my own experience of what might be done with a particular silent film. Here are some reasons for bringing the old masters of celluloid--Wiene, Lang, Murnau, Pabst, Ruttmann, DuPont and others--into American classrooms: The first advantage I would point out is precisely the fact that the films have no dialogue, something which has been considered by some to be a detriment. Rather like the effect of radio dramas in past years, which encouraged the listener to supply the missing scenery and action through use of the imagination, silent film is a less passive medium than is a talkie. The possibility for using a documentary or instructional film as a kind of ersatz teacher for 15 or 20 minutes does not exist with silent film. The technological impossibility of soundtrack dialogue in the 1920s can be compensated for in the foreign language classroom of the 1980s by recounting and discussing the film after the class has seen it. The silent film demands our participation. By not hearing any German, students are provided with the silence

they need in order to hear themselves and each other as they respond to a culturally-bound context supplied by a German filmmaker.

A second reason why I use German silent film in my instruction is a practical one. Many German silent films are very accessible and reasonably priced, even inexpensively priced. High school teachers have approached me in the past for advice on how to spend an allocation made by their district for acquiring copies of foreign films. When we think of German film, we tend immediately to think of what we last saw at the local repertoire house or campus film festival. We recall perhaps the lofty works of, say, a Werner Herzog, and we discover that these films come with an equally lofty price. Gradually accumulating a few of the <u>older</u> classics of German cinema, alongside the newer ones, can be well worth the investment. The film I will discuss in greater detail here, F. W. Murnau's <u>Der letzte Mann</u>, costs $40 to rent (that price from Images Film Archive), or can be purchased as a video for $350, as a 16 mm. film for $410. If your school participates in an audio-visual co-op, the rental cost will be considerably lower. Another practical consideration is running time. You will frequently find that these older films can be shown within one class period, or if they are longer, they are often easily dividable into two class sessions. Murnau's <u>Der</u>

letzte Mann, has a running time of 74 minutes, so it will spill over into two class periods. However, if you show the film in video format, it is very easy to stop it and resume the screening later. The 16 mm. version comes in two reels, each of which conveniently fits into a normal class period of less than one hour. As I hope to show you, this particular film is also simple enough so that its reels can be spaced a few days apart without loss of comprehension, in the event that you do not wish to devote two consecutive class periods to the viewing of film.

There is a third reason for using these films, and that is quite simply, that film deserves to be taught as film. Besides the potential of a given film for providing the context for language drills, and for Diskussionsanregung, the German silent film is an artistic offering. As such it reflects human concerns and impulses, and it offers the possibility for comparison not only between here and there, but also between then and now. But in addition to that, and perhaps of particular interest to our students, is the position of early German cinema at the threshhold of an industry which today claims huge chunks of our students' time and money.

If students nearing the end of their first year of college German, for example, can struggle through a short story by Peter Bichsel, Wolfgang Borchert, or even Franz

Kafka, then they certainly can share their interpretations--in writing and/or orally--of Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari, Metropolis, Der letzte Mann, or Berlin, die Sinfonie der GroBstadt. The responses of students to the story told by the film limited only by their own abilities to express themselves, not, as is the case with literature, by the complexity of the author's writing style. The degree to which the complexity of the filmmaker's visual style is a factor in students' ability to understand and respond to a film is relative to the class's level of proficiency. For example, students at an early learning stage can engage in the Nacherzählung of a film's sequence of events or be asked to verbalize in German what the actors were saying to each other at particular points in the film. More advanced language students can be encouraged to include in their remarks not just what was told in the film, but how it was told (through acting, motifs, camera effects, progression of scenes, or characteristic lighting), and they can also be asked their
opinions as to the significance of the film's narrative. Literature students of course can also engage in interpretation and will see parallels to the written works of the period, including, for example evidence of the Expressionist movement and the onset of science fiction. I have shown German silent films also in advanced courses on German civilization, in which students can be asked to watch

for historical realia, reflections of the issues of the day, and examples of distinctive features of German life.

Moreover, I would urge that in showing classic German films, you explore mechanics and style, camera angles, lighting and editing--the things which make a film's sociological and literary messages possible, and not insignificantly to our students, the things which were the forerunners of the stunning opening shots of Alfred Hitchcock's Foreign Correspondent and Psycho and of George Lucas' renowned special effects.

One of the films I have shown most frequently and with positive results is F. W. Murnau's Der letzte Mann, filmed in 1924. It was released in the United States under the title The Last Laugh, and is most frequently catalogued here under that title. It is a masterpiece of early filmmaking, the result of a very fruitful collaboration between director Murnau, scriptwriter Carl Meyer, cameraman Karl Freund, producer Erich Pommer, and the best-known German actor of the '20s, Emil Jannings, whose performance in Der letzte Mann, by the way, has been credited with being his best silent film performance.[1] Its appropriateness for use in German classes rests largely upon the simplicity of its narrative. There are virtually no characters besides that of Jannings developed to any extent in the course of the film. Jannings plays the head doorman at a posh urban

hotel. His sense of self-respect is intimately bound up in his job, and is symbolized by the revery in which he and those around him hold for his ornate porter's uniform, an ankle-length coat with epaulettes, braid, and shiny buttons. It is this uniform, and the general fascination he and his neighbors have for uniforms, that seem to define his very existence. Getting on in years, and no longer able easily to lift heavy luggage, the doorman is demoted to an attendant in the men's lavatory. The film simply shows the decline of the doorman from his initially proud position to a pitiful wreck of a man, wearing for his uniform only a plain linen jacket while he spends his working day in the basement restroom of the hotel. The filmmakers, however, take pity on the doorman, and provide what they concede to be a most improbable happy ending, in which the Jannings character inherits a fortune from an eccentric American millionaire. The film closes with the nouveau riche gluttonously consuming a lavish meal in the dining room of the same hotel.

Complementing the simplicity of the storyline is a fluid visual narrative, complete with camera work and editing so effective, that it has been said by film scholars to approach "pure cinema."[2] The progression of pictures is so carefully planned that in the entire film there is only one interruption by an explanatory Zwischentitel. This comes

just prior to the tacked-on ending I mentioned previously. The rest of the images are completely self-explanatory. In the version of Der letzte Mann most frequently available in this country, this one title has been replaced by a voice-over on an accompanying soundtrack. The relative absence of the Zwischentitel in this film enhances its applicability to the classroom, since students are not intermittently confronted with inserted English titles, as is unfortunately the case with many German silent films distributed in the U.S.

In discussing this film as film, there are several noteworthy aspects of technique which can be included in a class discussion. Many of them were revolutionary for their time and stem from the influence of the Expressionist movement, reflected, for example in producer Erich Pommer's statement of mision at the outset of the project: "Try to invent something mad!"[3] The most important feature is what is known as the "entfesselte Kamera." From the very outset of the film, it is clear that the camera, in contrast to the earliest films, such as Caligari, is no longer stationary. In fact, it is almost constantly traveling. For the opening scene, for example, Karl Freund mounted his camera on the handlebars of a bicycle, which he situated in a descending elevator cage. We see the doors of the elevator open and as Freund rides his bike across the hotel lobby and outside, to

where the porter is standing in the rain, hailing a cab, the camera carries us along, establishing the scene of the story to follow. At other points the camera is strapped to Freund's body, hand-held, suspended from wires as it swings through the air, or mounted on a dolly for traveling shots. All these ideas were new at the time and, as film scholar Gerald Mast has noted, they "set a kind of pattern that has . . . continued through the years."[4]

The "entfesselte Kamera" also aids in the problem of how to tell a story without words or soundtrack: the camera achieves the impression of sound. For example, note that at one point the doorman at home in his upstairs apartment hears a trumpet being played on the street below. The camera takes us from the doorman's ear down to the horn producing the sound. The feat was accomplished by placing the camera in a basket and sliding it down rails that had been rigged from the apartment window to the source of the sound, something which had never been done before. And in order to portray the sound "rising" to Jannings' ear, the descending angle shot was played backwards at an undercranked speed, thus producing an accelerated movement in the final product. With Der letzte Mann Murnau succeeded in breaking completely from the properties and limitations of the theatrical stage, which up to that time had been the predominant influence upon the movie set. In the words of

Robert Herlth, one of two set designers for the film, "Silent films demanded this kind of ingenuity."[5]

There are other important technical aspects to the film, familiarity with which will be helpful prior to discussing its social or literary merits. The filmmakers make effective use of multiple exposures and montage in order to convey dream sequences. The doorman, suffering from a severe hangover after celebrating his daughter's marriage, awakens to see his sister in double vision. After his demotion becomes the subject of neighborhood gossip, the laughing faces of the doorman's derisive neighbors appear together on the screen in a nightmarish revolving montage. A tour de force was accomplished with the doorman's drunken dream, in which he sees himself lifting the heaviest of trunks with the greatest of ease. Faces and objects, such as the metaphorical revolving door of the hotel, appear elongated or otherwise distorted, distinguishing this sequence of shots from those depicting the harsh reality of his actual circumstances. Murnau makes us aware of the fine line between reality and frightful irrationality when the doorman, leaving the hotel after his demotion, looks up at surrounding buildings, which appear to lean precariously, threatening to fall on the now belittled man.

Camera angles are an important means for telling this story: low angle shots (in which the camera "looks up" to

the doorman) occur primarily in the first part of the film, when the porter still stands tall in his all-important uniform. Once stripped of this sign of status and respect, the doorman is photographed with the camera positioned at higher angles, making him appear smaller and less significant. The consistency of camera angles also shows that it is not really this particular doorman to whom respect is accorded in German society, rather it is the uniform. For even when the doorman is replaced with a younger man, the new porter is also shown in a manner which makes him seem especially important. The doorman's sister comes to the hotel to deliver her brother's forgotten lunch and is shocked to find another person working as porter. The new doorman is framed in the doorway of the hotel. We see part of his back, his arm and shoulder. (Showing a figure from behind is a frequent means of conveying a sense of position and power in early German film and was used also by G. W. Pabst in depicting the surly butcher in Die freudlose Gasse.) To the right of the doorman and in the background, we see the quite small figure of the sister, viewed in a high angle shot, with the camera at the level of the man's shoulder.

Students will readily observe an important principle of film editing with this work, and one of the reasons why the story can be told without titles. After the film appeared

as The Last Laugh in the U.S., Murnau was quoted in a 1928 issue of Theater Magazine as saying, "I hope to be able to make the next picture without any titles whatever. The Last Laugh had only one. One way of eliminating titles is by showing two antagonistic thoughts as parallels; for example by wishing to convey the wealth of a certain person as being extreme, I would show alongside of him a greatly impoverished character. Symbolism would obviate titles."[6] Murnau's point is nicely illustrated in Der letzte Mann when he juxtaposes several matching shots of the ex-doorman miserably partaking of a lunchtime broth while waiting alone in the basement lavatory, and wealthy hotel guests dining upstairs on expensive fare. There are several repetitions of this up and down movement between two very different meals.

Direction of movement in the film is characteristic of the story being told. Ask your students in which direction things move. They should be able to point out several examples of "nach unten," in keeping with the demise of the main character: he finds himself stationed in the basement of the hotel, below the elegant dining room and the level of his previous employment. When his family learns of his demotion, and of his initial efforts to conceal it from them, his sister abandons him, moving in with his newly-wed daughter. The ex-doorman finds himself alone in the

apartment below that of his daughter and son-in-law. Ask your students also to recall the opening shot of the film: the descent in the elevator set the tone for the events to follow.

Another kind of movement is circular, seen most clearly in the revolving hotel door, an image which recurs in the doorman's dreams. It is through this door that the old doorman left his former job while a new man was entering. It indicates a seemingly endless cycle of ascendancy and decline.

What information about German society in the '20s can students glean by viewing this film? Some indications are obvious, others might require closer observation. The importance of the uniform will certainly provide fodder for discussion among students, especially with regard to the shape German history would take in the 1930s. Lotte Eisner, in her study of Murnau, even goes so far as to state that this "could only be a German story. For it could only happen in a country where the uniform . . . was more than God."[7] Interesting also at this juncture in the discussion, is Jannings' comportment with the uniform--tall, erect, swaggeringly proud, versus his stature as a lavatory attendant, when he is always stooped. It is as if it were the uniform that were holding him erect. There is even the legitimate question here, with which students can grapple,

as to whether or not the doorman deserves our sympathy. Is his attitude at the beginning of the film not smug? Does he not deserve his demise as the just desserts of his having defined himself in terms of his uniform?

Parenthetically, the very position of lavatory attendant, still common in many places in Europe, will be a new concept to some students, and you may well anticipate a question such as I have received from students: "Was macht er in der Toilette?"

If the film is used in a class in which historical considerations are appropriate, ask your students to recall instances when the main character was offered gratuities. These tips consist mostly of paper money, rather than coins. The film was made in 1924, when hyperinflation was rampant in Germany. The gratuities reflect not so much the generosity of the patrons as the diminished value of the Reichsmark. In one scene, when the Trinkgeld is given in the form of a coin, the recipient immediately bites it--a test of its value as precious metal.

The socio-economic conditions of the times, including the vivid class distinctions in German society, are called to our attention again at the very end of the film when a young man, unshaven and unkempt, approaches the new

millionaire and asks for a handout. The ex-doorman sympathetically offers him a ride in his coach.

Enquire also as to reflections in the film of the relationship between Germany and America, and attitudes of Germans toward this country. Note the attire of the affluent hotel patrons, particularly the women, who dress in keeping with American fashions of the "Roaring '20s", the era of the "Charleston." There is strong evidence in the concluding scenes of the frivolous "bathtub gin" mentality, as hotel customers laugh raucously over the unheard-of sudden wealth of the poor doorman and his comical unfamiliarity with the ways of the rich.

It is interesting also our German doorman works at the Hotel Atlantic (the English spelling is used), reflecting the reputation of English as a cosmopolitan Modesprache.

But the most telling comments on attitudes toward America come in the film's concluding appendage. The ex-doorman's good fortune, you will recall, comes at the behest of an American millionaire, who died in the arms of the lavatory attendant, and whose will stipulated that his fortune go to the last man in his presence while he was alive. We learn this by means of an inserted close-up of a newspaper article that explains the doorman's fortune. The American's name: A. G. Monney. Students will of course

recognize the significance of the last name, but ask them also if they are familiar with the German abbreviation AG. To many Germans in the 1920s, America was a land of sudden and tremendous wealth and limitless corporate possibilities, at least before 1929.

Culture classes and students interested in art and literature will be interested in the tell-tale signs of Expressionist influence on the film. The studio sets are meticulously realistic, as opposed to say the expressionistically bizarre scenery in Caligari, and are, together with the concentration on the "kleiner Mann," perhaps a greater reflection of Neue Sachlichkeit, to be represented soon by Alfred Döblin's Berlin writings, than of Expressionism per se. Yet the presence of Expressionism is unmistakable in images such as the teetering buildings and the blurry figures in the doorman's intoxicated dream, who try to do the impossible: lift a trunk that only he can handle, while all around them twirling shadows are cast by the ominous revolving door--symbol of the ongoing, coldly indifferent nature of human existence.

It is an appropriate concluding note to my remarks to discuss the problematic ending of Der letzte Mann. Film historians are unsure as to just why the ending was tacked on, preceded with a kind of disclaimer from the filmmakers that it was not to be taken seriously. Without the ending,

though, a film with a narrative this bleak probably would not have attracted much popularity, particularly from audiences growing accustomed to the new commercial fairy tales which were beginning to emanate from Hollywood. It is significant that the title given the film in its American distribution refers directly to the mindless laughter of the fairy tale ending, while, for example, the French title, Le Dernier des Hommes, reflects the original German idea.

I have found that interpretation of this film can often hinge on students' perception of the ending and its relative importance to the film's title. Students will most likely be aware of the sharp disparity between the main text of the film and this consciously separated epilogue. They will also likely assume from the story of A. G. Monney, that the film's title stems from the stipulation in Monney's last will and testament concerning the "last man" he saw. I have found it a fruitful approach to concentrate on this disparity and how it bears upon our understanding of the title. The improbability of the happy ending actually has the function of intensifying the hopelessness and despair of the Jannings character. Contrary to the superficial impression left by the ending, this appendage gives the entire work a bitterly cynical twist. As one of my second-year German students remarked, somberly, but also

with a gratifying spark of new insight, "Er wäre der letzte Mann auf der Welt, dem so was passieren würde."

Notes

[1] Roger Manvell and Heinrich Fraenkel, The German Cinema, (New York and Washington: Praeger, 1974), p. 37.

[2] Manvell and Fraenkel, p. 46.

[3] Erich Pommer, as quoted by Lotte H. Eisner, Murnau, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 62.

[4] Gerald Mast, A Short History of the Movies, (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 179.

[5] Robert Herlth, as quoted by Eisner, Murnau, p. 65.

[6] F. W. Murnau, as quoted by Eisner, Murnau, p. 184.

[7] Eisner, Murnau, p. 154.

David Caldwell
University of Northern Colorado

Der letzte Mann / The Last Laugh (1924)

Regisseur: F. W. Murnau
Drehbuch: Carl Meyer
Kamera: Karl Freund
Hauptdarsteller: Emil Jannings
Produzent: Erich Pommer

Leitfragen

Zur Filmkunst:

Was heiBt "entfesselte Kamera?" An welchen Stellen haben Sie die Benutzung einer entfesselten Kamera bemerkt? Was sind die Vorteile der entfesselten Kamera?

Obwohl viele Stummfilme Zwischentitel enthalten, hat dieser Film fast keine. Was sagt das über den Film? Wie ist das möglich gewesen?

Wie werden wichtige Gedankenströmungen (Expressionismus, Neue Sachlichkeit) reflektiert?

Inwiefern ist dieser Film ein Zeichen für die Entwicklung einer modernen Filmkunst, vom traditionellen Theater unabhängig?

Zur deutschen Lage:

Welche Zeichen der wirtschaftlich-sozialen Situation im Jahre 1924 haben Sie gesehen?

Enthält der Film Merkmale der deutschen Kultur? des deutschen Alltags? des deutschen Wertsystems?

Zu deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen:

Wie würde Amerika von den Deutschen in den 20er Jahren betrachtet?

Welcher EinfluB Übte die anglo-amerikanische Kultur auf Deutschland nach dem ersten Weltkrieg?

Spezifische Fragen

1. Wofür ist die Uniform ein Symbol?

2. Haben Sie Sympathie für den Pförtner gefühlt? Warum? Warum nicht?

3. Was ist die Bedeutung des Titels? des amerikanischen Titels?

4. Wie ist Essen im Film wichtig?

5. Denken Sie an Beispiele im Film, wo es eine Bewegung nach unten gibt! Was ist diese Bewegung wichtig? Gibt es andere Bewegungen im Film?

6. Der Regisseur hat nur einen Zwischentitel benutzt. Warum hat er ihn gerade vor den letzten Teil des Filmes gestellt? Ist diese Endung glaubhaft? Wie ist die Endung wichtig?

David Caldwell
University of Northern Colorado

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